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## Senate Votes to Allow Easier Import of Prescription Drugs

By ROBERT PEAR

**W**ASHINGTON, July 17 — The Senate approved a proposal today that would make it easier for Americans to import prescription drugs from Canada, where drug prices are often lower than in the United States.

The vote was 69 to 30. The proposal has broad support in the House as well, and President Bush endorsed the concept during the 2000 campaign, so chances of eventual passage appear good. Still, details remain to be worked out before a measure goes from Capitol Hill to the president's desk.

It was the first action by the Senate in a wide-ranging two-week debate on how to increase access to prescription medicines for people of all ages, especially the elderly.

Senator Byron L. Dorgan, Democrat of North Dakota, the author of the proposal to facilitate drug imports, said, "Life-saving prescription drugs save no lives if you cannot afford to purchase them."

The measure would allow licensed pharmacists and drug wholesalers in the United States to import prescription drugs from Canada, provided the medicines had already been approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

Congress passed a similar measure in 2000, but that law allowed imports from 26 countries, including Japan and members of the European Union. The Bush administration and the Clinton administration both refused to issue rules to carry out that law. They said they could not certify that the import plan would be safe or would save money for consumers.

The measure approved today applies only to Canada. Senators said the safety risks were minimal because Canada had a system of drug safety regulation similar to that in the United States.

Still, drug companies resisted the proposal, saying Canada could become a conduit for counterfeit and contaminated drugs.

Senator Orrin G. Hatch, Republican of Utah, said, "If this proposal becomes law, we are just placing our country in the hands of foreign terrorists who could easily get hold of various prescription drug products and spread desolation and disease."

The Senate is debating this and other proposals to lower drug costs while it searches for a consensus on legislation to help elderly people buy prescription medicines under Medicare. Democrats and Republicans have developed competing plans to add drug benefits to Medicare, the federal health insurance program for the elderly and disabled, but so far neither plan has the majority needed to pass.

One of the proposals being debated on the Senate floor this week would expand access to low-cost generic copies of brand-name medicines.

This proposal would limit the ability of brand-name drug companies to delay the approval of generic drugs by filing new patent claims and then filing lawsuits to enforce those patents. The bill would also outlaw collusive agreements under which brand-name drug companies pay generic companies to keep generic products off the market.

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